

EPIC FAIL - ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA - THE 'ALL-IN' FAIL
A SERMON BASED ON ACTS 4:32 - 5:10
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS
SUNDAY, MARCH 25, 2018
10:00 a.m.

Palm Sunday can feel like somewhat of an odd Sunday.

To be honest, it's a tougher one for clergy.

It's kind of a challenge to know what to do with it

when Easter is just a week away.

With palm branches,

and throwing cloaks before Jesus, and bowing down,

and songs of Hosanna,

and words like 'Behold The King of Glory'

'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'

with smiles and energy and joy,

it is a celebration of Jesus

but it's also kind of confusing.

Is today just a mini Easter?

Is this one the warm up before the big day?

Is Palm Sunday a farm team Sunday for the real Easter?

This can look like a practice Easter before next week's real Easter.

It can, if you don't know the story.

It can, if you are missing essential chapters in the story,

the Thursday and Friday services of Holy Week.

If you are missing the last supper and the cross,

it can feel like today is little Easter, and next Sunday is big Easter.

But if you know the story,

you realize that Palm Sunday

is more like the party that took place at the launching of the Titanic,

is more like Thelma and Louise going out for a drive,

is more like Amelia Earhart going for a flight.

You realize that despite the enthusiasm

there are some very disastrous days ahead.

Today's Scripture is an unusual choice for Palm Sunday.

You won't likely find any other church looking at this text

on this day.

But you've got me for your minister. So, yeah, sorry.

The reason I wanted to look at this text today,
is because on a Sunday when we are celebrating a profession of faith
on a Sunday when we are waving palms, and shouting Hosanna,
on a Sunday when it looks like we are all about
launching and jumping in with this Jesus guy,
on a Sunday that looks like it is all about
commitment, and participation, and joining the song
and getting into the boat and pushing off,
I want us to see, and I want you to know,
that a journey of faith isn't an easier path.
It isn't just about being at the party,
although there is some of that.
The journey of faith is also about blazing the path.
It is also about staying behind after the party to clean up.
"All-in", being in the boat, comes with a cost.

Ananias and Sapphira is a tough story to hear and understand.

Ananias and Sapphira don't seem that bad.

What they did doesn't seem that bad.

People in the early church were truly excited.

The Holy Spirit was moving in their lives.

Peter and John had just been released from jail and from custody.

The believers were praying for boldness to preach the good news,
the good news that Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

The Holy Spirit answered their prayer.

They spoke boldly.

They looked after one another.

They looked out for one another.

They gave generously to meet each others needs.

They looked after one another to the point,

they didn't just give from income, they gave from assets.

Some of them started selling off property,

bringing the money from the sale to the apostles,

so it could be distributed to those in need.

A fellow from Cyprus, named Joseph, a Levite

sold a whole field he owned,

put all the money at the apostles' feet.

Everyone was so touched and impressed,

they gave this Joseph from Cyprus a new name.

Barnabas which means Son of Encouragement.

There's always a keener in the crowd.

Barnabas was an encouragement and an example to the church.

He was both feet "all-in."

Ananias and Sapphira presumably, likely, saw his example.

Likely heard his great new name. Barnabas.

So they sold a piece of property too

I mean, it wasn't a whole thing, a whole field,

but still, they sold it right?

I bet some people weren't selling anything.

They kept some of the money from the sale.

Which doesn't seem unreasonable,

keeping some for your own needs.

Ananias brought the rest,

and put it at the apostles' feet,

the same as Barnabas did,

well, almost the same as Barnabas did.

I wonder if he was imagining a speech

the apostles might make about him.

How their thanks might be expressed to him.

It doesn't seem like a huge crime.

Maybe Ananias was simply a little over-eager to be well-thought of.

And really, who of us isn't?

Looking at the money brought to him for the church's use,

Peter breaks every established principle of effective fundraising.

No, "Thank you for your contribution,

your gift will help many."

No, "You are a cherished member of our organization."

No, "With your gift,

you will be part of the president's circle,

with your name printed in the annual report."

Peter doesn't even issue a receipt.

Instead Peter says to Ananias, asks him,

'Is this all of it?'

Peter.

Maybe Ananias didn't make eye contact or stuttered or something.

Or maybe Peter had inspiration from the Holy Spirit, to know.

Because somehow Peter knew, he said,

'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart,

that you have lied to the Holy Spirit,

and have kept for yourself

some of the money you received for the land?

Didn't it belong to you before it was sold?

And after it was sold wasn't it all at your disposal?

What made you think of doing such a thing?

You have not lied to men but to God.'

When Ananias heard this he fell down and died.

This was not a good way for Peter to build a donor base.

Tough to ask

"Can we count on your contribution next year?"

if your donor is dead.

It just seems so extreme.

Ananias and Sapphira don't seem that bad to me.

At least they're giving.

So Ananias' body gets dragged out of the room

and a few hours later,

his wife Sapphira comes looking for him.

She runs into Peter,

who asks her, doesn't warn her, just asks her,

"Tell me, is this how much you and Ananias got for your land?"

She returns an answer of what seems to be a white lie,

a keeping up appearances,

relatively harmless answer, yes, that's what we got.

Again, Peter doesn't thank her for the gift.

He confronts her.

'How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?

Look the men who dragged your husband out of here dead,

are at the door for you.'

Then Sapphira fell down at his feet and died.

You can imagine the headlines in the religious press.

In the Bethlehem Star the headline reads

Local pastor invokes death upon donors who don't give their all.

Pastor quoted,

“With their example we are finally meeting budget.”

Looking at Peter in this account,

you can't help but think,

wow, if he worked for Revenue Canada,

and asked, “Have you declared all your income?”

Imagine the compliance!

But really, this is a tough story to hear.

The punishment doesn't seem to fit the crime.

Death for not giving all your money seems really extreme.

Commentators do interpretive gymnastics with this passage.

One says,

‘from a medical point of view

it was probably a simple case of heart-failure

due to shock.'

Others speak of the story as being just legend,
an attempt to explain Ananias' sudden death before Peter,
with the death of Sapphira being tacked on to add weight.

We want to be gentle with Ananias and Sapphira,
because we know how easy it is to get to where they were,
sometimes we are presently standing where they stood.

If it happened to them,
then what becomes of us?

We want sympathy for them,
because we identify with them.
We would resent someone asking us,

"Is this all you could give?"

We would become indignant.

When our kids shake out the card on birthdays and at Christmas,
they wouldn't dare ask, "Is this it?"

We tell them to count themselves fortunate

that they got anything at all.

Peter seems like nothing but a greedy television preacher here.

Is this everything?

We want to be affirmed for what we have done

and what we do do,

and what we intend to do,

not shamed for what we haven't done.

We want to be celebrated for what we have given,

not punished for what we have kept.

Our desire to be well thought of trips us up

more easily than we realize.

The story is told of the minister who told his congregation,

'Next week, I plan to preach about the sin of lying.

To help you understand my sermon,

I want you all to read Mark chapter 17.

The following Sunday, as he prepared to deliver his sermon,

the minister asked for a show of hands.

He wanted to know how many had read Mark chapter 17.

A lot of hands went up.

The minister smiled and said, Mark has only 16 chapters.

So, shall we get started with the sermon?

We want sympathy for Ananias and Sapphira,

because we know how easy it is,

to hold back,

to hold back the truth, the whole truth,

to lie to ourselves,

never mind lie to God.

When I think about giving,

I like to think I am a generous person.

When the number comes up on my income tax

for charitable givings,

I can feel

that I am doing my part.

that I am part of the solution.

that I am giving more than I can really afford to give.

I think that I'm all in.

But what I never look at, and what I keep private and to myself,

is what I have kept.

I think that I'm all in.

I want sympathy for Ananias and Sapphira,

because I think,

wow, if I stood in front of Peter,

and he asked me,

is this all of what you are able to give?

I'd be tempted to say yes too.

I want to hear, "Thank you Doug, Son of Encouragement.

Truth is, I'd be the next one dragged out.

Like Ananias and Sapphira,

I want the spiritual reputation,

But I don't want to pay retail for it.

This is a tough story to hear.

We want sympathy for Ananias and Sapphira.

We know how difficult the truth is.

And 'all-in' seems exceedingly expensive.

This is despite the fact Jesus said,

“Whoever finds their life will lose it,
Whoever loses their life for my sake,
will find it.”

It feels safer to hold back,

withhold the whole truth,
say we're all in,
but keep one foot on the dock.

We say we are all in.

But in saying this, we lie to ourselves and in so doing, lie to God.

And here is precisely where the problem is.

It isn't that Ananias and Sapphira didn't turn over all their money,
that wasn't the problem.

It was lying to God that killed them.

I'm doing all I can.

I'm a generous person.

It's not that big a deal.

It's all I can afford.

I can handle this on my own.

I'm okay.

I'm doing fine.

I will be fine.

I don't have a problem.

I'm not hurting anyone.

God is my number one.

We hold back the truth, withhold our trust in God,
and it kills us.

Jesus said it is the truth that will set you free.

Jesus said I am the truth, and the way and the life.

Jesus said,

Those who lose their lives for my sake will find life.

In the first five books of Acts,

there are three property transactions, purchases and sales.

Judas Iscariot bought a field,
with money he received for giving up Jesus.

He died on the land he bought.

Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of their land.

Gave some of the proceeds to the church.

Told themselves and Peter, and God,

that what they were handing over was everything, a lie

They died from the land they sold.

Joseph from Cyprus sold a field.

He was the one who stood before God with empty hands.

In holding nothing back,

in giving God the truth of his everything,

He became a new man, a new person,

He got a new name, a new identity.

Barnabas, Son of Encouragement.

Most of us live our lives at Palm Sunday.

A little Easter, an easy Hosanna, a 'go home when it's done',

a controlled commitment

We travel faith in a vehicle with multiple exits.

But even that's not what will kill us.

What will kill us is the lie that we are "all in".

The man who had a son with epilepsy that the disciples couldn't heal

confessed to Jesus,

I believe, help me in my unbelief.

Jesus brought healing.

Not being able to be all in wasn't the problem.

The lie about it was the problem.

This is a tough story.

It has to be.

Otherwise we would blow past and ignore it.

We would continue thinking

that by keeping one foot on the dock

that by holding back,

that by knowing where the exit is,

keeping control our assets

is a legitimate path to salvation,

If Ananias and Sapphira wasn't a tough story,

we wouldn't snap to attention and take notice.

Holding back the truth from God,

or at least,

our unwillingness to admit we are holding back from God,

will kill us, leaving us with nothing.

Go all in.

It is in sacrificing and giving up the illusions we have about ourselves,

that will bring you to the complete experience of Jesus.

It is handing over what we have been holding back,

that will take you to the table of the last supper on Thursday.

It is in being honest about what we are doing,

that will take you to the cross on Friday

It is in complete truthfulness before God

that will take you through the holiest of weeks

to an empty tomb and the real Easter.

Go all in.

The truth will set you free, Jesus said.

Free to follow the way.

Free to find life to the full

Free to live for the resurrected Jesus,

who is worth everything.

Amen.